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Genre's Definition Examined

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“Genre’s Definition Examined” by Kayla Strasser

Instructor’s Notes

In this paper, Kayla uses Rhetorical Genre Theory to give an extended definition of the term “genre.” She uses that theory as the basis of an argument for the misrepresentation of the term “genre” within the general public, and why it is important for writers to have an accurate and complex understanding of what genres really are. She uses difficult, scholarly texts to support her claims about genre, and uses a high level of critical thinking to make a complex definition of genre. What is the argument she is actually making? Why is an extended definition considered an argument? What makes this such a complex argument?

Writer’s Biography

Kayla Strasser is a freshman (class of 2017) Nursing major from Springfield, OH. Kayla enjoys reading and academic writing. She spends her free time with family and serving with her church. Her hobbies include working out, yard work and playing piano.

Genre’s Definition Examined

Recently, genre scholars have tasked themselves with the complex assignment of defining genre. Scholars such as Lloyd Bitzer, Anis Bawarshi, Stanley E. Fish, and Amy Devitt have made consequential progress in defining genre and explaining how it is used in all facets of life. However, many people outside the compositional community grossly misunderstand genre, failing to realize its importance. Thus despite the illuminating efforts and research of genre scholars, some people remain unconvinced and insistently hold an erroneous view of genre. Drawing from the research of genre experts, this paper will dispel an erroneous understanding of genre and examine its actual definition. It will define genre as a fitting response to repetitive rhetorical situations, being defined by the reader’s interpretation, and being flexible

within its form.

A primary component of genre's definition is its response to a repeated rhetorical situation, which Bitzer defines as "a natural context of persons, events, objects, relations, and an exigence which strongly invites utterance" (5). Thus, a rhetorical situation is a condition that comes about through people, relationships, events, etc., which require some sort of oral or written response. For example, the death of a president creates a situation that requires a eulogy in response to the death. Upon further explanation of the response required by the situation, Bitzer states that "Rhetorical discourse comes into existence as a response to a situation, in the same sense that an answer comes into existence in response to a question, or a solution in response to a problem" (5). In essence, Bitzer is saying that a rhetorical situation is what brings genre into existence. Each rhetorical situation has an exigence, a need marked by urgency, which requires an apt response, just as the death of a president (the situation) requires a eulogy (the fitting response). As these situations are often repetitive, discourse communities have established specific, traditional, pragmatic and methodical responses to them. These fitting responses are genres. Thus, far from simply being a classification as some people might understandably argue "after all, the word genre, borrowed from the French, means "sort" or "kind" " (Bawarshi 7), genres are firstly, an appropriate response to a specific situation.

Having established that genres are fitting responses, it is then possible to refute another of the myths believed about genre's definition. Some people believe that genre is identified purely by its form. For example, Stanley Fish asks, "How do you recognize a poem when you see one? The commonsense answer, to which many literary critics and linguists are committed, is that the act of recognition is triggered by the observable presence of distinguishing features. That is, you know a poem when you see one because its language displays the characteristics that you know to be proper to poems" (para 6). However, genre is defined by the interpretation of the reader. Fish illustrates this by using an experiment he did on some of his students who were studying religious poetry as an example. He put up a random list of names on the board, told his students it was a poem, and instructed them to devise its meaning: which they did elaborately. Fish uses this example as evidence that

literary works don't fit into genres because they follow the form of that genre. As he states, "The conclusion therefore is that all objects are made and not found, and that they are made by the interpretive strategies we set in motion" (para 24). By this he means that texts are placed into that genre by the interpretation of a discourse community. Fish's students were able to devise the meaning of that list of names because of how they interpreted it, not because it fit into a specific genre form.

Amy Devitt adds to the discussion of form/interpretation by stating that "I will argue not for teaching the textual features of particular genres...but rather for teaching genre awareness... as a side effect of teaching genre awareness, students may also acquire new genres that can serve as antecedent genres for their future writing" (192). Devitt is arguing for a learning strategy that echoes Fish's point about genres being defined by the reader's interpretation. Rather than teaching the very specific formulas of an individual genre, she proposes that students learn to interpret genre so that they can go anywhere that it exists and know how to learn and use that genre. Thus, despite the resolve with which many hold onto this mistaken understanding, genre is not defined by form, but rather by the interpretation of the reader.

One final fictitious belief held by some is that genre acts as an austere master that requires slavish obedience and conformity to the forms and formulas of that genre. This is simply not the case. Genres are evolving forms; not a rigid set of rules to which writers must adhere. Though all works are limited by genre and the work and worldview of earlier authors, as Bawarshi states, "rather than being static backdrops against which speakers and writers act, social and rhetorical conditions are constantly being reproduced and transformed as speakers and writers act within them" (9). In other words, genres build upon the work of earlier writers and evolve over time as they are used by diverse discourse communities with varying ideologies and purposes. From this, Devitt concludes that "Genres allow a range of choices, as well as set constraints" (200). Though writing will always be limited by the mere fact that genre exists, it also changes alongside the communities that use it, and is thus far from inflexible.

While current research, defining genre as a fitting response to repetitive rhetorical situations, being defined by the reader's

interpretation, and being flexible within its form, has dispelled many erroneous beliefs about genre's definition, there is still room to grow. This topic is far from exhausted and perhaps, with further research, it may be possible to persuade those who continue to stubbornly hold on to mistaken views of genre.

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